

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymchwiliad i Gwella Iechyd Emosiynol ac Iechyd Meddwl Plant a Phobl Ifanc | Inquiry into The Emotional and Mental Health of Children and Young People EMH 12

Ymateb gan: Volunteering Matters

Response from: Volunteering Matters

Introduction

Volunteering Matters welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Children, Young People and Education Committee's Inquiry into the emotional and mental health of children and young people.

Volunteering Matters develops and delivers volunteer-led solutions to some of the most significant challenges facing individuals and their communities today. We know, through years of successful work, that investing in people through the power of volunteering makes a tangible difference, building stronger, more cohesive communities and achieving lasting results. The Young People and Education Committee has stated it wishes to capture the views and experiences of children and young people, their families and practitioners in a useful and sensitive way. The focus of our submission is to present to the committee the insights we have acquired into the views and feelings of these groups, particularly those of children and young people. The evidence presented below combines' insights from our practitioners, along with quantitative and qualitative evidence from our projects, chief among them, Mind Matters.

Mind Matters is a peer-led project in Torfaen that helps young people become aware of mental health and well-being issues. Our volunteers receive training and work in partnership with the primary health care team in Torfaen. Each volunteer receives ongoing support through regular one-to-one personal development reviews that look at skills, experience and progression. All our volunteers are registered to receive their Millennium Volunteer Awards.

We would welcome the opportunity to provide further evidence in person to the committee. In particular, if the committee felt it was appropriate and useful, we would be pleased to ask one of the young 'peer-educators' from our Mind Matters project to accompany us so they can give members of the committee more detailed information about what young people have been saying to them.

1. Our research among young people

1.1 Over the last two years, an increasing number of young people have told us how they've developed low-level mental health problems. Our experience is that many have had a limited understanding of mental health and a lack of support services to turn to before their problems became more serious. This prompted us to undertake further consultation, followed by a small-scale pilot project. 30 young people, who are participating in the pilot (which runs until March 2018), have devised the Mind Matters model. They felt that young people respond best to health information when it is presented by their peers, and they worked together to design the Mind Matters workshop and activities.

1.2 A Gwent-wide survey was distributed in February-April 2016 by young people to their peers aged 16-25 exploring the barriers they faced in attempting to move into education, employment or training. The potential barriers referenced including concerns around health. Of the 200 young people who responded, 94% reported that they did not know enough about mental health issues to recognise if help was needed. 86% stated that they were not aware of what support services were available to them.

1.3 An online survey about young people's health was conducted in October-November 2016 among 11-25 year olds (predominantly in Torfaen). Of 100 respondents, 70% felt that there was a lack of support for young people with emotional issues and 75% reported that they would prefer to talk to their peers about these issues, rather than an adult.

1.4 1,500 young people in Gwent, aged 13-25, who attended our peer-led sex education sessions completed a pre/post evaluation about their health (between April 2015 and June 2017). 76% said they did not feel confident to talk to their parents/guardians about their feelings.

1.5 In June 2017, we facilitated a focus group about mental health with 15 young people in Torfaen, aged 16-25. The main themes which emerged were:

- There is not enough accessible mental health information available to young people.
- Focus group participants were unsure how to talk about mental health, how to look after their own mental health or what self-help techniques were available.
- There was concern that doctors prescribe anti-depressants too readily for young people, without signposting to any other support.

2. The Mind Matters model – peer education

2.1 The results of the research we conducted led to a focus on peer-education to provide young people with the knowledge and skills to increase the overall health of themselves, their families, and their communities.

2.2 Evaluations from a pre-existing project run by Volunteering Matters, Sex Matters Too (which operates in Monmouthshire, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen and Newport) showed that young people report positive views towards peer interventions including: finding peer-led sessions fun; feeling that peers are credible sources of information; preferring peer-led sessions over teacher-led sessions. The feedback from Sex Matters Too convinced us that this was a model that could also be used in the area of mental health and well-being. We hope to use the model to build social connections and reduce isolation as an increasing number of children and young people with low-level mental health issues identified that they felt alone and had little or no connections with social networks.

2.3 Our evidence shows that peer-led interventions can have positive outcomes, especially when compared to ‘traditional’ approaches to teaching health promotion topics.

2.4 As well as imparting knowledge, peer education approaches usually focus on raising young people’s self-esteem and social competence as well as developing their skills so that they can make informed choices about their behaviour, and feel able to act on these choices.

2.5 Peer education approaches value the views and experiences of young people, making them the experts and recognising that they can positively influence and support each other.

2.6 Involvement can enhance peer educators’ confidence and their sense of engagement with their school and communities. Their contribution can benefit all young people but may have particular value as a way of including young people who are often excluded from the mainstream notably young parents, young people from black and minority ethnic groups, disaffected young people and those with special educational needs.

2.7 So far, 50 young people aged 14-25; have attended peer-led Mind Matters workshops. The pre- and post-workshop questionnaires strongly suggest that this approach has been successful:

- 90% stated an increase in knowledge around mental health issues in young people

- 98% highlighted that they now felt confident to talk to their peers about mental health concerns.
- 84% added that they have gained more information about other support services available to them in the community.
- 99% stated that they liked having information from their peers – it ‘felt more real’ and more ‘comfortable’ to talk about issues affecting them.

2.8 It is widely accepted that early intervention can stop some mental health issues escalating. Supporting early intervention and signposting for lower-level support provisions is essential.

2.9 Developing more resilient young people and aiding informed choices about their own wellbeing is vital too. We believe that our peer-led model can play an important role.

3. Our recommendation

3.1 Our submission has focused on one small but important aspect of the emotional and mental well-being of children and young people, that of peer-led education. We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government and all other relevant authorities and service providers support the growth of peer-led education on mental health issues, along with independent evaluation of its longer term impact. We recommend that authorities and service providers draw on and invest in the particular expertise and adaptability of third sector organisations in improving provision and standards in this area.